



## Narrative analysis of self-disclosing strategies of women with lesbian identity

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*In the article substantive provisions of narrative direction of qualitative psychological research are considered. Narrative research in psychology can have the various theoretical bases. At the same time, social – constructivist based theoretical positions are most relevant in the qualitative approach in psychological research.*

*In the article research results of a study of the self-disclosing strategies of women with non conventional sexual orientation in the process of interaction with a standard social context are presented. The research model based on the qualitative approach to gathering and the analysis of empirical data is applied. As a variant of realization of the qualitative approach the analysis of narrations is used. In the work the author's position in the relation both gathering procedure and the analysis and interpretation of empirical data is represented. Three strategy of self-disclosing have been formulated as a result of the study: selective self-disclosing, trial self-disclosing, indirect self-disclosing.*

**Key words:** *qualitative psychological research, sintagmal component of the structure of research, narrative direction, marginal group, lesbianism, standard social context, self-disclosing, the analysis of narrations, selective self-disclosing, trial self-disclosing, indirect self-disclosing.*

### **Introduction**

In this article we define qualitative approach in psychological research as the coordinated and consecutive unity of world outlook and methodological positions, as a generality of theoretical preconditions and directions of realization of research practice, and as a set of specific techniques and methods of gathering and the analysis of data.

The world outlook component in the structure of the qualitative approach establishes scientific position concerning co-ordinates of ontologic and epistemologic spaces. In definition of the qualitative approach to psychological research finds reflection the ontological position that treats external reality as the result of interpretations made by an individual. From the epistemological point in the qualitative approach mainly constructivist positions are realized according to which the knowledge has subjective and inter - subjective character. The pragmatic component of the structure of the qualitative approach establishes rules of application of methods of gathering and the analysis of data.

In our opinion, ascertaining the representation in the structure of the research approach of two named components is not sufficient for its full description. It should be continued, and the reference to sintagmatic component becomes important. The syntagma is the integral semantic unit allocated in the studied phenomenon. It means, that in this or that component of investigated structure there is a combination



of the elements giving to it integrity and completeness, and, simultaneously, leaving it “opened” for interrelation with other components of the structure. Functions of the syntagmatical component of the structure of the research approach consist in connection, or “fastening” of paradigmatic and pragmatic components.

Required “fastening” is carried out by means of two elements. The first one is theoretical bases of the statement of the objective of qualitative psychological research. The research objective, in turn, means the formulation of some research questions and most general representations about the character of data and especially of analytical actions by which the researcher begins to be guided. The second “fastening” element is the theoretical representations about a possible direction of movement to objects in view. We consider expedient to speak about three directions of realization of the qualitative approach in psychological research: phenomenological, narrative, and discursive. Our article is devoted to the detailed consideration of one of the directions, namely to a narrative one.

In the first part the general problems of narrative research in psychology are discussed. We consider important to show, that such research can be carried out from the point of view of different methodologies. Thus the closest to the idea of the qualitative approach is the relation to narrative accepted social constructionism. In the second part of article we give an example own research based on our understanding of narrative direction of realization of the qualitative approach.

### **Theoretical sources of narrative discourse in psychological research**

Narrative psychology studies forms, structure and functions of narrations in an extra-literary context. [35] Works of the Russian theorists of the literature of 20th years of the last century, American school of «new criticism», experiences in the semiotics analysis of narrations in tradition of the French structuralism serves as sources of the narrative psychology

The formal school of literary criticism in Russia offered a set of the literary stylistic techniques providing recognition of its structure as a basic unit of the analysis of the text [5]. V. Propp in his book «The fairy tale Morphology» reduced a variety of the semantic maintenance of Slavic fairy tales to a number of functions (“need”, “search” “decision”) and to a set of characters (for example, “hero”, “donator”) was one of the most influential works here [3].

Developing this direction, American literary school of «new criticism» has offered a number of schemes of the analysis of the Western literature. In particular, E. Frei considered four main genres: the novel, a comedy, tragedy and satire. In its opinion, these genres can be used as categories analysis of narrations and out of a fiction.

Later the French school of structuralism involved linguistic theory for the semiotics analysis of narrations. Ideas of F. de Saussure were used in the analysis of phenomenological processes of consciousness, for example, intentionality. [6] P. Riker stated the basic function of a narration as research of “case experience», that is the action which does not result completely from the text [4].



One of the substantive provisions fixed in narratological literature consists that the narration operates as the fundamental process of understanding out of any specific literary tradition. M.Butor defines a narration as «one of essential elements of our understanding of the reality» [13].

When the psychology shows interest to the analysis of narrations, a “character” problematic become of prime interest. “Character” is the most direct correlate between the story-teller and an audience. The research question is formulated in a context of the relation of the individual to its own history with an accent on himself as the actual part of the message.

One of the first schemes in narrative psychology was used for the study of communication between a life and history which is told about it. J. Cotre analyzed typical narrations, «which an individual lives in a context of collectively shared meanings». [27] He has concentrated attention to personal and social dynamics of narratives and asserted, that certain narrations have a generating potential which allows people to overcome life crises.

The prospect of combination of problems of psychology and the modern literary analysis is developed by J. Potter, P.Stringer, and M.Wehterell [34]. For example, they assumed, that the theory of the personality which considers traits as the basic determinants of identity, is compatible to roles of characters in the literature. Naming these roles «codes intelligibility», they asserted, that their use promotes development of ability of the person to influence the vital situation positively.

T.Sabrin defined the project of narrative as a research of the way which «people use to comprehend the sense of the world through narrations» [39]. It is necessary to notice, that T.Sabrin and a number of other psychologists place emphasis on the clinical or psychotherapeutic side of narratives. E.Kin studying clinical conditions of occurrence of a paranoia, has drawn a conclusion of the influence of narratives provoking illness which included catastrophic predictions of the future, polarity of good and harm, absolute opposition of «I» and «another» [25]. Psychoanalytic interpretations of narrations are aimed at comprehension by the client of «narration smoothing», as an unproductive way of finding by a person of a feeling of full self - value [40] In another variant of psychoanalytic treatment of narrations R.Shafer gives them a role of maintenance of conditions of the client' active relation to life [41] D.Epston, M White, K. Murray consider the work with the conditions operating the process of identification as an overall objective of narrative psychotherapy [20].

For the further specification of functions and research potential of narrations it is expedient to address cognitive psychology. Cognitive psychology prescribes to the person the role of the experimenter in «life laboratory». As the experimenter, it should construct theories which predict behavior of others. As the researches devoted to a fundamental attribution error show, the requirement for the control and management can appear more strongly, than aspiration to distinguish and estimate a true state of affairs. The control always remains private business of the individual: its real-



ization is not connected in any way with environment characteristics, and depends on intra – psychic processes. S.Fiske and S.Taylor state this principle as follows: «The control potential depends exclusively on perception of the individual of possibility to execute the given action» [21]. Some scientist think that narratives are not part of this theoretical picture because they contain elements which break mechanisms of the work of the strict theory based on scientific principles. Comparing products of the scientific theory and narratives P.Robinson and L. Hop come to the conclusion, that «narration goes within a context, it is situational, so the results do not give in to be checked by experimental methods» [38]. However, there is also another point of view. R. Shafer considers narratives to be “pictures of reality». Such a treatment allows arguing on them from the point of view cognitive psychology. Decidedly “the picture of reality” develops as a result of intra – psychic activity. Point of issue then is the congruency of images in narrations to the reality and the ability of the individual to supervise his or her own narrations so that they as much as possible corresponded to the reality. “Bad” (not congruent and not supervised) narrations make the person a victim of circumstances. The therapy problem then consists in providing the client with more active interpretations that «there where there were only events, there could be a choice» [40]. Thus, both psychoanalysis and cognitive psychology place the narrative «inside the head» of a person isolating it from a social situation and not showing interest to its actual statement.

One of the first attempts to define a scientific status of narratives in another way is present in the works of C. J. Bruner [10; 11] He distinguished such concepts as «a paradigmatic reasoning» and «narration». «The paradigmatic reasoning» is identical to scientific explanation and allows seeing the world of objects which co-operate on the basis of regular samples. Unlike it, narrations support a subjective picture of the world in which the individual includes the purposes, fears and so forth.

C. J. Bruner uses several criteria to differentiate above mentioned concepts. So, language of a paradigmatic reasoning describes the world of the facts whereas narrations are the way to express a point of view. Paradigmatic reasoning leads to a synchronic picture where everything, that is described, takes place simultaneously. Narrations assume the description of changes, sometimes during a long time. Paradigmatic reasoning is explicit whereas narrations include unexpressed knowledge which is meant in the message.

From the C.J. Bruner’ point of view the studying of narrations with their orientation to systems of values, always appears on the backstage. Meanwhile, in his opinion, paradigmatic reasoning and narrations have identical heuristic value for research practice. He proves this position saying that narrations comprise cultural caused samples, following which people understand themselves and the social world. In this sense they are a subject for psychological research. On the other hand, C. J. Bruner considers narrations as system of categories for the organization of individual experience. In this case he reduces narrations to a version of individual mental activity despite aspiration to reconcile their social and intra – psychic parts.



The similar opinion of narrations formulates R.Harre in the frameworks of ethogenetic approach. R.Harre uses the term narration to address the ways by which «values are attached to actions». Accepting the point of view according to which efficiency of the individual depends on his or her possession of the resources necessary for a survival, he opposes two sides of social activity. These sides are practical and expressional. They correspond to C.J. Bruner' dichotomy of a paradigmatic reasoning and narrations. The expressional side of social activity is a source of values and senses. Narrations concern such aspects of life as "adventure", "crisis", "opposition" where results of actions cannot be predicted. Thus, both practical, and the expressional side are the components of the structure of narrations. The opposition of the practical and social sides finds expression in language. The first one is presented by verbs (to indicate what have been done made), the second one - adverbs (to indicate in what way something have been done). R.Harre's ethogenetic approach is the important step for an explanation of circulation of values and senses between the practical and expressional sides of social activity. Practical values can rhetorically (that is in language) be transformed in expressional, and on the contrary. At the same time, R.Harre, as well as C. J. Bruner reduces the expressional side to practical limiting its function by the expression of the social status.

### **The social-constructionist approach to narrative research**

Since the second half 80th years of the last century narrative psychology has been included in wider movement known as social constructionism. In social constructionism narrations not simply reflect actual events. They serve as means of the organization and coordination of personal and social experience of the individual. On the one hand, they correspond with internal structures and emotional conditions of the story-teller (orientation to self-identification, to objects, existential and morally-valuable orientations). However it is more important, that narrations are built in the structure of social interaction, are reproduced during dialogues, function as an equivalent of the speech act - requests, refusals and so on. In other words, narrations are aimed at a certain influence on the listener to cause his or her response - mental reaction or reaction at behavioral level. Besides, one of the major functions of narrations is the self-presentation in the course of interaction.

Within the sphere of social constructionism narrative psychology addresses to the research of self and identity. Specificity of social constructionism in the research of self and identity consists in that the self cannot be discovered and described like any object in the physical world. Social constructionism prefers to speak of «linguistically generated» identity [34]. Using language the person constantly interprets and changes value of own actions and actions of other people according to the practical and moral problems. Hence, the believe that it is possible to describe some kind of "preexisting" self in isolation from flowing interactions and interpretations should be regarded as error.



Meanwhile, the statement, that the person gives sense to his or herself and to other people exclusively by means of speech activity is challenged by critics of social constructionism. In particular, I. Parker considers, that social constructionism evades from the answer to a question: «What is the maintenance of an internal life of people when they use a discourse [31]? According to I. Parker, ability to be reflective is the essence of the person and is a link between the individual and society. Unfortunately, he continues, approaches much social constructionism tend to ignore the ability of the person to be reflective.

I. Parker's position causes associations with the general critical analysis of the postmodernist approach to understanding of the psychology offered by M. Augustinus and I. Walker [8]. Their argument consists that «the person as active and intentional subject is absent in approaches which purposely avoid the recognition that it possesses ability to have judgment of him or her self as real and unique self. Results of studying self then are reduced to the description of individual discursive acts representing the various social actions mainly connected with self-presentation. It leads to creation of concepts of self in which « subjectivity... is made so contextually dependent, fluid and flexible that experience fluctuating in time and from a situation to a situation becomes an only subject of psychology» [5, P. 276].

In this polemic it is necessary to note a position of those who seriously concerns idea of the research practice supporting a principle of linguistic and narrative construction of identity with preservation of interest to the individual nature of subjectivity. On the foreground is the position according to which identity can be characterized through the relation between human experience and narration structure [1; 2; 15]. This position is realized in the numerous researches having narrative acts as the object of the study. There are some common characteristics in these studies:

1. The psychological researches which are carried out in the course of narrative direction often have interdisciplinary character and are noted by parallels and points of crossing with ethnographic, feministic, discursive and other research areas.

2. In narrative researches the process of gathering, analyzing, and interpretation of data without the reference to quantitative statistical procedures is applied. In this connection J. Gubrin and J. Holstein use a metaphor of "a modern language of a qualitative method" to make a definition of narrative a research.

3. In narrative researches the narration is considered as joint interactive experience of the respondent and the researcher. In this connection the accent is transferred from the description of the investigated phenomenon leading to hierarchical and structured knowledge of it on the dialogical representations about individual experience. Data are analyzed depending on a context. As the essence of a narration is ephemeral and personal, the researcher should find ways to agree about values and results with the respondents, using the information received from them and involving his own experience and creativity. The researcher and the respondent share the common space in which both of them initiate data and discuss and analyze them.

4. In spite of the fact that narrative research often represents studying of an individual case, its results can quite be generalized.



### **Strategy of self-disclosing of women with nonconventional sexual orientations in a standard social context: a case of qualitative research**

The accessory of the person to a certain marginal social group is the expression of the meaning he or she possesses in relation to a standard social context. E. Stounkivist, speaking about social – psychological status of the marginalized individual notices that such a person is intended to live in two societies, two cultures the collision between which is inevitable [42].

This conflict has not only external displays, such as, for example, «a march of sexual minorities». The «march», being the external form of self-presentation, assumes that there is an internal conflict within its participants. The need for self-disclosing, on the one hand, and pressure of a standard social context on another underlie such conflict.

Based on this assumption the subject matter of our study is the strategy of self-disclosing of the people characterized as having marginal self-identity in their interaction with a standard social context.

The list of the works devoted to studying of the given problem, is limited enough. Nevertheless, a number of authors addresses to it. For example, a paper by B. Limandri is devoted to the studying of self-disclosing of the people with AIDS comes to an end with a conclusion, that these people appear to open or hide the fact of the illness entering in mutual relations with other people. The inconsistent nature of the marginal self-disclosing B. Limandri explains appealing to the experience of the feeling of shame, forcing to hide a true state of affairs. However at the same time these people feel the need to admit for the illness, at least to have a possibility to receive the qualified help [29]. R. Cain, discussing self-disclosing of homosexual identity, underlines dilemma present in ways of its realization. Choosing openness, the homosexual person subjects itself to the risk of insults or sneers, losses of friends, families or work. However and concealment of the orientation does not relieve of problems. Closeness can result, for example, in experience of feeling of the fault because of insincerity in mutual relations with those whom such person used to trust [11].

J. Wells and W. Kline also underline a duality of self-disclosing of homosexuality. On the one hand, it is necessary for the development of relations, with another - means the risk of rejection [14]. H. Gershman develops this thought, speaking about «double anxiety». The anxiety concerning the open experience of the feelings is accompanied by the uneasiness connected with the thought that losing such a possibility may lead the individual to refuse to himself to have the right to be a real self [44].

In our article we address to the phenomenon seldom discussed in the domestic psychological literature, namely lesbianism. We consider self-disclosing strategy of women with non conventional sexual orientation in interaction with a standard social context.

In the cultural discourse of lesbianism two mutually exclusive concepts are found out: feministic that stresses the idea of women's independence and the female erotic impulse not requiring heterosexual contacts, and masculine that considers lesbianism a way of replacement of the male's nature. Later versions of lesbianism consider it



as one of the forms of the opposition to the principles of the patriarchal control and domination [23].

In the psychological researches female homosexuality has been viewed upon depending on the theoretical preferences of various authors. For example, A. Rich investigated social representations of lesbianism to reveal the structure and the maintenance of biases in relation to homosexual female orientation [30]. E. Liahna's work is devoted to the inquiry into the dynamics of mutual relations of women with homosexual orientation inside «lesbian communities». It presents the reader with a number of the conclusions about its standards and role components [22]. J. Ussher addresses actual lived experience of the homosexual identity through the stages of the psychosexual development. She especially underlines the ambivalence of the emotions accompanying acquisition of the experience of a sexual inclination to representatives of the same gender in masculine socio cultural context [36]. It is necessary to note S.Kitzinger's works, one of which - «The social construction of lesbianism» has given way to the understanding of female homosexuality in the tide of postmodern psychology [16].

To gather research data we used the following procedure. In a network of the Internet some chats of women with non conventional sexual orientation have been defined. Our assistant placed on it the message with the request for cooperation in the research carried out. Here we wish to stress the importance of the ethical issues. We deliberately avoided a situation in which there could be «naive subjects». Unequivocally research position has been declared from the very beginning. It is interesting, that the virtual context of an establishment of relations has appeared much more open, than it could be if direct contacts would be meant. The desire to talk about the problems was stated by women of different ages possessing the different social status, and profession. Thus attempts to talk to our assistant as with the potential sexual partner practically were absent.

Process of gathering the research data consisted of three stages. First as it has already been told, our assistant was represented as the psychologist inviting potential participants. Sorting of answers of respondents (it were letters of the different maintenance - from the requests once again to explain, «what for and to whom it is necessary», to the attempts to receive free psychological consultation) was passed for the decision of following problems. First, it was necessary to establish the character of self-identification of respondents precisely. Easier speaking, they should name themselves lesbians, to recognize both propensity and practice of non conventional sexual relations. However for our research self-identity ascertaining was insufficient. Therefore, secondly, for the further contacts we had been selecting those who reported difficulties tested in mutual relations with heterosexuals. Thus stories about conflicts in homosexual pairs were ignored by us. Thus, the women identifying as the lesbian and having difficulties in mutual relations with people sharing social sexual conventions appeared our respondents.

At the second stage of data gathering we asked respondents to send us descriptions of episodes, cases, events concerning the sphere of their mutual relations with





people with traditional sexual orientation - parents, colleagues, probably friends. We recognized that the structure analysis of narratives and interpretation of their content allow to address to a live first-hand experience of interpersonal relations.

The requirements to the narrations taken as research material were formulated by us at two levels - general-theoretical and concrete - research. General-theoretical criteria to narratives which allowed put them into the space of psychological research, were formulated as follows.

1. Narration is considered as a process. It means, that the structure of episodes repeats from a story to a story.

2. Narration is a discursive formation. Narrations do not duplicate each other. At the same time, in them the basic themes concerning their subject matter, and ways with which these themes reveal are reproduced.

3. Narration has temporal dimension. Thus it traces not only the linear time sequence from the past to the present but also represents cases of crossing of time, returns to the past or transitions in the future. These points mark essential aspects of narrations, from the point of view of stated experience.

4. Narrations are stories about the world of human relations.

The following became concrete research criteria.

1. The narration should be made from the first person. In this case only its author becomes object of research.

2. The narration should contain the generalizations opening subjective experience of the author, developed in time, instead of transfer of the episodes similar in what other people participated.

3. The narration text should contain plot lines, details of private life of the author, the description of emotional experiences.

4. The narration should open experience of relations with other people, their expansion in time so that it was possible to catch experience movement, instead of to receive its «photographic» display.

The criteria listed has allowed to analyze further only those narrations which represented research value and provided, thereby, the validity of the research.

In total 12 narrations have been selected answering to listed criteria. They were analyzed further.

The idea of our approach to the analysis of an initial research material consists in re-configuration of narratives aimed at distinguishing in them opposite operating forces. These forces are in dialectic relations and make the co-ordinate whole. Thus, polar oppositions provide coherence of experience of relations. Pressure which is tested by the person, constantly being in "drift" between poles of forces, reflects dynamics of relations [6].

The variant of structural analysis of the texts, offered by K. Levi-Stross was a concrete technique of the analysis of data in our work. Usually two stages are distinguished in it. On the first the researcher reveals essential, from the point of view of a research objective, episodes. In our research the episodes concerning the descrip-



tion of directly worried or meant relations were essential. In them respondents spoke about themselves as about participants of relations, and relations made a plot of a narrative. Along with revealing of essential episodes their primary sorting was made. They have been divided by us into two groups: those that confirmed readiness of respondents for self-disclosing, and those that testified to aspiration to hide homosexual self-identity.

The second stage of analysis consists in classification of episodes by means of their consecutive comparisons. The researcher answers a question: whether the episodes under analysis are alike or different.

If the answer is «are different», episodes are located in different columns of the created table. If the answer is «are alike» they go to the same column. Thus, groups of similar episodes are fixed in columns. At the second analysis stage we consistently compared the essential episodes of narrations containing elements of self-disclosing in pairs. As a result we have received three groups of essential episodes of narrations. The examples of the results of the classification are given below.

Group 1. « At school I have almost no one to speak to. I remember a sensation of constant loneliness and defenselessness. I always dreamt of the friend, just about the friend, who would listen to and understand me».

Group 2. «And then I have asked: «Mom, what you would feel if you have learnt that I date girls? »

Group 3. «Each time when our collective leaves a city for a picnic a stream of condolences falls upon me concerning absence of the husband or «the good guy». Everybody discuss children and other family problems - and I sit alone and I am silent though I could tell much. Yes here there are colleagues-men. But they intuitively assume that for me there is no man. It is difficult to explain it but it changes much in relations

Then the common content of each groups of episodes have been interpreted. The differentiation of strategies of self-disclosing of the women carrying to lesbian identity became the result of interpretation.

The first strategy is called «selective self-disclosing». Women with non conventional sexual orientation choose to whom, when, where, and for what purpose to make a necessary confession. In some situations and at dialogue with some people the information is concealed. In other situations and to other people it is given in full or in part. Thus individual characteristics of those to whom self-disclosing and their prospective reactions is addressed are important. As a whole this strategy reflects aspiration to divide the world into two groups: a big one members of which are not informed about «stigma», and a smaller one representatives of which are often considered as a support and help source.

The second strategy is designated by us as «trial self-disclosing. It is on use to make the borders of interpersonal relations less rigid and consists in tracing of reaction of the partner for small portions of the information consistently given. Depending on reaction, self-disclosing goes deep or stops. If the partner expresses aversion of the



information and negatively reacts to it the process interrupts. If he shows understanding, or even shows ambivalent reaction, self-disclosing, most likely, will proceed.

At last, the third strategy is the strategy of "indirect self-disclosing" when the presentation of stigma» does not become outright, and is made by means of hints, allegories, the metaphors, specific style of nonverbal behaviors.

Reliability of the results received in the research is provided with their coordination with results of other researches which subject to study self-disclosing strategies. In the work of K. Dindia and T. Tieu it is shown, that people meaningfully and deliberately operate self-disclosing of homosexual identity [18]. N. Herman ascertains that the former patients of psychiatric clinics selectively hide this fact [24]. S. Petronio with colleagues prove that teenagers choose circumstances at which to do a confession of acts not approved by adults, for example the alcohols use [42].

### **The Literature**

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